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A Case for Teaching Latin Etymology in the English Language Classroom in Japan

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A Case for Teaching Latin Etymology in the English Language Classroom in Japan

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Abstract

Few English instructors in Japan teach Latin roots as a means of expanding their students' vocabulary. Traditionally this instruction has aimed at giving students only passive recognition of Latinate words. The authors used a model of first language vocabulary acquisition by David Corson to design a lesson format which takes students to active use of Latin-derived words.

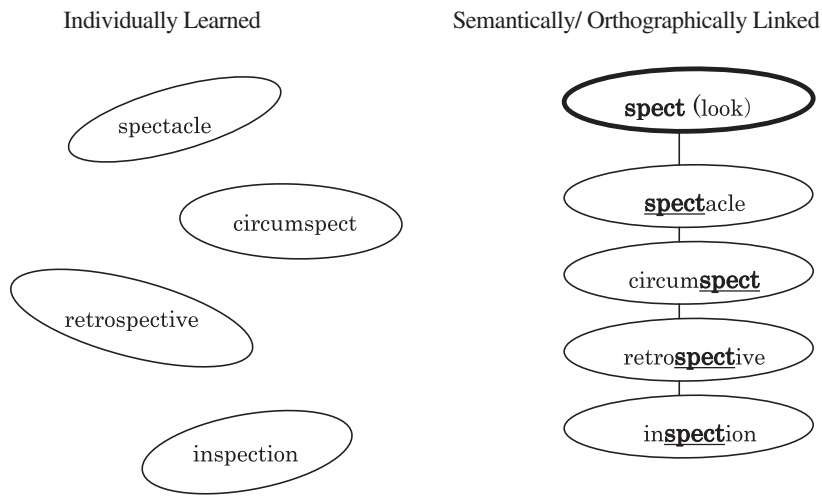
The purpose of this paper is to present a methodology for teaching the roots of Latin and Greek-based words in intermediate to advanced English classes in Japan as a means of increasing students' vocabulary acquisition and active word use. In Britain and the U.S. etymology is an established part of ESL reading classes. Yet in Japan very few instructors use this approach, and only one domestically published etymology textbook is presently on the market. Clearly Japan's English teachers need to be made aware of the merits of this kind of instruction before they will consider adopting it.

The study of Latin or Latin etymology by both native and nonnative speakers can be justified on three levels: the great amount of Latin in our language, the psycholinguistic process of storing words, and recent research on learning strategies. Over 60 percent of English words are of Latin origin, over 90 percent in the areas of science and technology. (Green, 1996) The English language contains 178 Anglo-Saxon root words but 280 others, almost all Latin and Greek. (Skeat, 1917) Henry (1993) says that "12 Latin and 2 Greek roots, along with 20 of the most frequently used prefixes would generate an estimated 100,000 words," quite impressive, considering that the average native-speaking high school graduate's vocabulary is about 40,000 words. (Corson, 1995)

Psycholinguistic research on word storage and retrieval indicates that there are different ways the brain can input vocabulary. It can store words individually without any connection

to other words, as in rote learning. Through this process it will separately store the words “spectacle,” “circumspect,” “retrospective,” and “inspection,” and call each of them up individually for use. A second method of storage is by grouping words according to meaning or semantically and orthographically similar word parts. If the language learner is aware that the Latin stem “spect” means “look” and can recognize the common thread of meaning in the following words, “spectacle” (something to look at), “circumspect” (careful to look around), “retrospective” (concerned with looking back), and “inspection” (a looking into), he will store the words together under the root “spect” and add words to this grouping over time. He can also call up any word under this category more quickly than words stored individually, resulting in their more frequent use and likely retention. This type of mental organization occurs when Latin or Latin-based words are learned along with the meanings of their parts. (Corson, 1995, 1997)

Table: Storage of Words in Memory



But the strongest support for teaching Latin etymology to ESL/EFL students comes from investigations into learning strategies. There is growing agreement that no one method of vocabulary learning is sufficient, and that all have drawbacks. Take, for example, extensive reading, where students guess meanings of words from context. Studies show that in general

foreigner learners are not as adept at guessing from context as native speakers (Huckin and Coady, 1999) and make significantly less progress in incidental vocabulary learning. (Gu, 2003) Zimmerman (1994) concluded that 3 hours of vocabulary strategy instruction per week in the ESL classroom along with self-selected reading resulted in more vocabulary learning than the reading alone. If one considers that the “University Word List,” a collection of 1,000 words representative of college textbook vocabulary, is composed almost entirely of Latin-based words, (Nation, 1990) there seems little question that the study of Latin etymology should be a part of any academic-bound student’s preparation.

Our goal should be for students to both remember Latinate words and use them in speech and writing. In the west Latin etymology has been viewed as a means for decoding words. Little thought has been given to active word use. But in today’s world where international exchange and publishing in English are standard in many professions, we can no longer ignore this needed skill. David Corson (1997) describes the steps children go through in learning and beginning to use advanced vocabulary in their own language. Many of his conclusions are relevant to second language learners as well.

Steps in Advanced Vocabulary Acquisition among Native Speaking Children

1. Initial encounter in reading

Children encounter most new words through reading in school textbooks or in storybooks at home.

2. Actual learning in a spoken context

Even passive retention of a word does not ordinarily take place until it has been reintroduced in speech, and this is usually done in the home by the mother or father. The child asks for help. The adult pronounces the problem word, which the child mimics. The parent then provides a definition and examples of the word in spoken contexts.

3. Negotiated discussion of text

Up to this point the child may be able to understand the word but can not use it. To learn to use the word, he must try it out on a supportive listener who will “acknowledge, qualify,

enrich, and reinforce” what is said. (Corson, 1997) This listener is usually the parent, and the most likely discussion will be of the text in which the word appeared. It is through this spoken negotiation and renegotiation of usage and meaning that new words are learned. Active use can occur without reading but cannot occur without speaking practice.

Corson (1995) notes the absence of this step from most ESL vocabulary lessons and from students’ home environments with predictable consequences. “Because ESL students often miss natural opportunities outside the classroom to turn their ‘quality input into quality output’ (Peirce, 1995), graduates from these language classes sometimes leave them with their language proficiency little improved.”

My appended EFL etymology lesson was inspired by Corson’s model but has been adapted to foreign adult learners and the classroom setting. My students are intermediate level freshmen in Hosei University’s Sociology Department. Through experience I’ve found they are able to comfortably work with six new Latin forms at a time. I choose forms with high frequency and transparent meaning in words. I group and sequence the forms so that a large number of English words can be generated from their combination. Appendix I lists the forms I present first term.

Corson’s model shows a child encountering a new word for the first time, but my students are adults with different levels of vocabulary awareness. Whenever possible, I introduce Latin forms using words in the students’ repertoires. Pierson (1989) states that studying the etymology of learned words is advantageous. This “meaningful learning” (Ausabel, 1967), connecting new information to something already learned, is more likely to be remembered and generalized to other contexts. These known words serve as a reference point for new words with the same forms met later in the lesson.

Part 1, Exercise 1 of my lesson is a set of six dialogs. Each dialog contains a word with a target Latin form. Students silently read the dialogs and guess the Latin-derived meanings of these words. The dialogs function both as written and spoken context. The teacher models pronunciation by reading them aloud with a student. The students mimic and afterward practice pronunciation by reading the same conversations again with a partner.

In Part 2 a table presents the six defined Latin forms again with their meanings and other examples of words containing them. This can help the learner establish semantic

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categories in his mind. The sentence completion in Exercises 2 and 4 gives the EFL learners extra practice with decoding forms for meaning. Part 3, a simple question and answer exercise, provides students with contextualized speaking practice using easily understood derived words from Parts 1 and 2.

One way of generating negotiated discussion is to have students read a high interest piece containing Latinate vocabulary derived from forms previously introduced (Exercise A). The text can be limited to the actual words covered in the lessons or expanded to include other words with the target forms. Words containing forms from previous lessons should also appear here to ensure review and continued use. The example I've supplied is my twelfth and final lesson of first term. This reading is followed by decoding vocabulary for meaning (Exercise B) and by factual questions on the text which require use of the target words in the answers (Exercise C). If solicited orally by the teacher in class, these responses can function as students' first use of the words in speech with a native speaker.

The next and most critical part of the process follows (Exercise D), where students answer opinion or personal questions related to the theme of the reading using the Latinate forms. Here group work is essential as learners have many more opportunities to speak the target language than in teacher-centered activities. Also, discussion among students makes the teacher's input much more comprehensible, and output can be modified, as when one student asks another to explain what he has just said. Finally, the discussion questions can be assigned as homework to allow for additional feedback by the teacher.

Corson (1997) urges instructors to combine etymology lessons with classes which "give priority to the learning of some curriculum content." Smoke (2001) at Hunter College used readings on classical languages and language learning. In my class alternate lessons are devoted to the newspaper. Students complete teacher-written exercises, which include the Latinate vocabulary of the previous lessons, on features of the newspaper. In a pair activity they report on a newspaper article which they chose and prepared for homework, defining key vocabulary and responding to standard who-what-when-where-why-how questions about their accounts. This seems in keeping with Corson's view (1997) that "the necessary raw materials for this word learning lie in frequent encounters with words in many contexts that display the rules for their application, and in regular opportunities to play these 'language games'".

(negotiated discussion) at a high standard of performance.”

The program described above will place great demands on the teacher’s time and creativity in generating course materials. Sources for exercises, such as Baudoin’s *Reader’s Choice* (1994) and Green’s *The Greek and Latin Roots of English* (1990) exist but are too difficult to use with most Japanese students and do not contain the critical reading/discussion component. Eichosha has a textbook on Latin etymology, McKim’s *Expanding Your Vocabulary Roots*, (1994) appropriate for intermediate level Japanese university students, but no interactive or discussion exercises are included. There is a great need for textbooks in this area.

Vocabulary acquisition is not the inevitable result of extensive or even focused reading in the classroom. It is a complex process which requires the learner to use multiple strategies for success. The boom in the TOEFL® and TOEIC® courses, the popularity of study abroad programs, and the call by the Ministry of Education (Japan, 1998) for universities to promote graduate studies and produce professionals capable of representing Japan on the world stage all underscore students’ need for an efficient way of acquiring large amounts of English vocabulary. Studying Latin roots should be one of those ways.

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Appendix I

First Term Latin Stems and Affixes

Lesson 1: re = back, again

inter = between

un = not

sub = under, less than

pre = before

ex = out

Lesson 2: co, com, con = together

duc = lead

pos, pon = put

in, im, il, ir = in

tract = pull

de = away

Lesson 3: trans = across

port = carry
miss, mit = send
dict = say
pro = forward, ahead
contra, contro = against,
opposite

Lesson 4: gress = go
fer = carry
ject = throw
ven = come
voc, vok = call
scrib, scrip, scriv = write

Lesson 5: dis, div, dif = apart, separate
dis = not
in, im, il, ir = not
ad = to
pend, pens = hang
tend, tens = stretch

Lesson 6: mob, mot, mov = move
auto = self
intro, intra = inside
spec, spect = look
vert, vers = turn
cede, ceed, ces = go

Appendix II

CHAPTER 6A Part 1. Dialogs.

Exercise 1. Read each dialog. Answer the vocabulary questions.

1. (at a soccer game)

A. What's all the commotion down there?

B. Some of the fans. They're not happy with the final score. They're trying to break everything.

1) Commotion probably means _____ .

a) the disorganized movement of many people

b) many people standing quietly in one spot

2. B. So, what do you plan to buy after you get your first big paycheck?

A. An automobile! Something sporty, with a big stereo.

2) An automobile is a machine that _____ .

a) moves by itself when you step on the gas

b) moves only when you get out and push it

3. A. Do you know that girl over there? I'd really like to meet her.

B. Sure. She's in my club. I'll introduce you.

3) Introduce means to lead someone _____ .

a) out of an area or away from others

b) inside a social group or into meeting others

4. (Traveler) B. Where do I go now?

(Airport clerk) A. Proceed through that gate. Someone needs to inspect your bags before you get on the plane.

4) Proceed through that gate probably means to _____ .

a) run

b) go

5) Inspect your bags probably means to _____ .

a) look inside

b) not look

5. A. What shape would you call this? ▽

B. I don't know. Maybe a diamond or an inverted pyramid. That's what we learned in class.

6) Inverted means _____ .

a) turned in the opposite direction

b) without a backbone

Part 2. Latin-based Forms

commotion (Dialog 1)

mot, mov, mob mean to move

motion = movement

movie = moving pictures

mobile phone = a phone that moves
with you from place to place

automobile (Dialog 2)

auto means self

automatic = acting by itself

automated teller machine (ATM)=
machine that gives you money itself
without help from a bank clerk

introduce (Dialog 3)

intro, intra mean inside

introduction = the act of leading one
inside another person's area so
they can meet

intravenous = (medicine) put inside
the blood vessels
(opposite: extra = outside;
e.g., extraordinary, extracurricular)

proceed (Dialog 4)

ceed, cede, cess mean to go

precede = go before

recede = go back

inspect (Dialog 4)

spec, spect means to see

spectacles = glasses used for seeing

spectacular = exciting to see

inverted (Dialog 5)

vert, vers mean to turn

advertise = turn a message
toward someone

convertible = a car whose roof can
be turned down

Exercise 2. Complete each sentence with the correct word from the Word Box.

Word Box

autonomous	intramural	accede
motivation	convert	suspect

1. My mother wasn't born a Catholic. She is a _____.

(someone who turned to a new religion)

2. Police _____ that a serial killer killed the girl in Nara.

(are looking into the idea that)

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3. Many university students these days don't have a lot of _____.
(reason to act or move)
4. Each year our elementary school had an _____ sports competition.
(using players from inside the school only)
5. Taiwan is still an _____ country.
(controlling itself; not controlled by others)
6. Prince Charles will probably _____ to the position of king after his mother dies.
(go to)

Exercise 3. Answer in complete sentences using the underlined vocabulary.

1. Once you have a job and are making good money, what kind of automobile do you expect to buy, a convertible or a regular car? Why?

(I expect { to buy a convertible because _____)
 { not to buy

2. How long have you had a mobile phone and what kind do you have right now?

(I've had a mobile phone for _____ years and now I have a _____)

3. Name someone you'd like to be introduced to. Why?

(I'd like to be introduced to _____ because he/ she _____)

4. If you had the chance, would you like to work part-time inspecting people's baggage at the airport? Why?

({ I'd like to inspect people's baggage because _____)
 { I wouldn't like

5. If your hairline recedes a lot in the future, what do you think you will do?

(If my hairline recedes a lot, I'll probably _____)

Exercise 4. Guess the meaning of the underlined words using your knowledge of Latin-based forms and the other words in the sentences. Do not use your dictionaries.

1. After the accident, the man was immobile and lived in bed.

Immobile probably means _____.

2. John was talkative and loved being with people, but Robert was much more introverted.

Introverted probably means _____.

3. Before a woman decides to marry someone, she usually does a lot of introspection.

Introspection probably means _____.

4. President Bush has diverted money from peace programs and put that money into the war. (Hint: divert = dis + vert)

Divert probably means _____.

5. Before businesses start anything new, they usually write up a prospectus.

Prospectus probably means _____.

Exercise A. Read the following information about mobile phones.

Mobile Phones: Danger to Health

The mobile phone is a wonderful invention, but many people say it can pose dangers

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

to people's health if used improperly. When your ear touches your cell phone, the phone

4. _____

introduces EMFs into your head. EMFs are electric energy, invisible to the eye. The

5. _____

6. _____

EMFs of today's portable phones are weaker than in older phones, but they can still

7. _____

interfere with your thinking and cause damage if you are exposed to them for a long

8. _____

9. _____

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time. The smaller your head, the greater the danger. When their cell phone calls exceed

10. _____

20 minutes in length, children and teenagers often report dizziness and hotness or

11. _____

discomfort where the phone touched their heads. Over a long time this stress to the

12. _____

brain may induce early Alzheimer's disease or even cancer.

13. _____

What can you do to protect yourself? Don't use your phone in automobiles, trains, or

14. _____

15. _____

elevators. The steel walls of these places convert even weak EMFs into very strong,

16. _____

dangerous rays and transmit them to everyone in the same car as you. Also, don't

17. _____

suspend your cell phone from your belt. It continues to emit EMFs even when you aren't

18. _____

19. _____

using it. Use a headset to make or receive calls and always extend your antenna to its

20. _____

full length when talking. Also inspect your next phone very carefully before you buy it.

21. _____

Reject any phone that uses more than one watt of power. Follow this advice and you can

22. _____

23. _____

prevent most damage to your health from mobile phones.

24. _____

Exercise B. Guess and write the meaning of each underlined word in the story above.

Each word has one or two Latin parts. Try to use the meaning of the Latin parts in the answers you give.

Example: The mobile phone is a wonderful invention.

1. able to be moved

2. something coming in, something new

Exercise C. Underline a sentence in the reading which answers each question. There should be one or more Latin-based words in every answer.

1. What is the mobile phone?
2. When can it pose a danger to people's health?
3. What happens when you hold a mobile phone to your ear?
4. What are EMFs?
5. What is true about today's portable phones?
6. What two things can they still do?
7. How long are the cell phone calls of some children and teenagers?
8. What things do children and teenagers often report after these calls?
9. What may this stress induce?
10. What question does the second paragraph ask?
11. Where shouldn't you use your phone?
12. What do the steel walls of these places do?
13. Also, what else shouldn't you do?
14. What does your phone continue to do?
15. What should you do before you buy your next cell phone?
16. What should you do if a phone uses more than one watt of power?
17. What will happen if you follow this advice?

Exercise D. With a partner ask and answer the discussion questions truthfully. Try to use at least 2 Latin-based words in your answers. You can add extra information that you have learned through newspapers, magazines, TV, or conversations with friends. If you do not have a cell phone, you can answer about a friend or family member's phone.

1. What kind of mobile phone do you have, how long have you had it, and how much do you pay for portable phone service each month?

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2. Have you inspected your phone for the watt or power level? If yes, how many watts are you exposed to when you use your phone? If not, do you think your phone poses any danger to you?
3. When you make very long calls, what kind of discomfort do you feel? What kind of problems have your friends reported after long calls? What other health problems can cell phone use induce after many years?
4. Do you ever use your phone improperly? Check the things you do or don't do and then tell your partner.

YES NO

- | | | |
|-------|-------|--|
| _____ | _____ | 1. Make calls that <u>exceed</u> more than a few minutes |
| _____ | _____ | 2. Use the phone in <u>automobiles</u> , trains, or elevators |
| _____ | _____ | 3. <u>Suspend</u> your phone from a belt or chain on your body |
| _____ | _____ | 4. Not <u>extend</u> the antenna when making calls |
| _____ | _____ | 5. Not use a headset to cut EMF <u>transmission</u> to the brain |
5. This report about mobile phones is controversial. Some scientists say the phones are dangerous. Some say they are not. What is your opinion about portable phones?
- If you think that they might be dangerous, tell the information you agree with in this report. If you think they are not dangerous, tell what information you do not agree with. Use as many of the Latin-based words as possible.